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New look at the CIA

If CIA Director Stansfield Turner wanted to emphasize a new spirit of openness in American intelligence, he could hardly find a better forum than a potentially hostile college audience. The wish being the father of the act, Turner exposed himself to tough questions this week from Stanford University students.

The appearance tells more about Stansfield Turner than it does about the Central Intelligence Agency. He is confident and articulate; unafraid to place himself in difficult positions; sure of his power of command. Above all, as a busy man with little time for idle repartee, he is determined to project an image of a reformed CIA that is under control. Caught in a crossfire between critics who complain of too little change and others who lament his supposed gutting of the CIA's clandestine operations, Turner has gone on the offensive. He is extolling the virtues of the CIA while simultaneously avoiding the pitfall of discrediting all that has gone before him.

The words are comforting. Embarrassed by disclosures of meddling in the internal affairs of other nations, most Americans should welcome Turner's assurances that a tight lid has been placed on political action by CIA agents. Commitments to increased openness — interpreted in particular as increased oversight of intelligence operations by the president and Congress — have a reassuring ring to them. There's also a case to be made for paring oversized staffs of spies, and for relying more on satellites than intrigue for intelligence gathering.

But when all is said and done, how effective is the nation's system of gathering and evaluating intelligence? Will Turner's shakeups at the CIA improve or weaken these processes? These are questions to which answers are not yet available.

If Turner came across at Stanford as witty and well-reasoned, reports from inside the CIA have been less favorable.

Turner's plan to rely increasingly on "advanced technical devices" to collect military, political and economic data is undermined by the new capacity of the Soviet Union to destroy intelligence satellites and by faulty evaluations in the past. If the U.S., using satellite-supplied data, is unable to make reliable predictions of Soviet grain harvests, will it fare better in the more difficult tasks of evaluating Soviet military capacities and intentions?

If American intelligence has been compromised in the past in order to bolster administration policies, isn't the possibility of future abuses increased rather than decreased by expanding Turner's authority? This expansion of the CIA director's power, in the name of "centralization," reduces the opportunity for dissenting assessments of the information this nation collects. In 1976 the Ford administration sanctioned two teams of analysts to assess the military trends and intentions of the Soviet Union. One team consisted of regular intelligence community experts. The other was composed of well-informed outsiders. The result was a new set of convictions. Rather than seeking parity with the U.S., as the CIA had previously estimated, it was concluded that the Soviets were clearly seeking superiority — a hardly startling consensus in view of the Soviet's fivefold increase in strategic nuclear power since 1964, along with rapid expansion of conventional forces.

Turner told his Stanford audience that he was "very happy to see us turning the corner on the critical attitude towards intelligence." This is indeed a welcome development in an age when what one doesn't know can be fatal. The United States can afford no less than a first-rate intelligence system. The American public must rely on congressional oversight committees to determine if the many intelligence changes wrought by President Carter and CIA Director Turner work toward that end.